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ABSTRACT

Sexual harassment is difficult to define. A study was undertaken to examine four variables related to sexual harassment: (1) sexual harassment when behaviors are unwelcome and sexual; (2) unwelcome nonsexual behavior called nonsexual aggravation; (3) welcome sexual behavior which includes organizationally dysfunctional relations and nondysfunctional ones; and (4) welcome nonsexual behavior including social support. Participants (N=308) were employees of a military organization including officers, enlisted soldiers, and civilian workers. Since women were considered the sex likely to be harassed, they were oversampled. Surveys measured sex, age, marital status, race, supervisory status, pay grade, percentage of males in work unit, group membership, incidence of harassment, and type of harassment. The results showed that incidence of sexual harassment was associated with age, marital status, and sex. Enlisted personnel were more likely to be harassed than were civilians or officers. Nonsexual aggravation was related to the incidence and severity of harassment. The most frequent harassment was sexist humor. Managers of organizations might monitor nonsexual aggravation as a less controversial indicator of sexual harassment than common measures. (ABL)

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# Psychometric and Theoretical Issues in the Study of Sexual Harassment[1]

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Abstract

Although there is a growing concern with research on sexual harassment, there has been no effort to document the psychometric properties of survey measures. Based on our analysis of the Merit System Protection Board concept of sexual harassment, it was expected that sexual harassment would relate positively to perceptual variables: such as perceived fraternization among coworkers, and perceived unpleasant (but nonsexual) aggravation. Data came from a survey of 308 employees of a military installation in the eastern United States. Two moderately reliable measures of sexual harassment were criteria. Partial correlations between these two sex harassment measures and the attitude variables, holding constant nine background variables tend to support our theoretical analysis.

## Preface

In 1981, one of the authors appraised the the extent of sexual harassment in an organization. Interviews with knowledgable people were held, and they indicated that sexual harassment might be a problem for the organization. Therefore, a survey was designed to measure the extent of sexual harassment to facilitate planning for an organizational response to the problem. Several experts who had done research in sexual harassment were consulted. Then we designed a new survey, based on the large scale federal survey by the Merit System Protection Board; thus, we could compare the results of the federal survey with the results of this local survey and determine if the problem was better, worse, or the same. In addition, however, we wanted to put sexual harassment in context, and to understand it in relation to other attitudes and perceptions of the victim. We had developed a two-dimensional model of sexual harassment based on our reading of the definition of the concept used by the Merit System Protection Board. The initial results of our survey were reported to management, and eventually the organization adopted a program to prevent sexual harassment: all units of the organization received a four hour block of training developed by outside consultants. This program requires individuals to be able to define sex discrimination, sexual harassment, management responsibilities, and individual resources for coping. This paper presents the organization and the profession a more complete analysis of the theoretical model than was possible earlier. Technical studies were completed as time from other projects allowed. Sexual harassment is still a potential problem in many organizations, and therefore, our efforts to measure the extent of it may be helpful to other researchers in the future. In addition, our story may help other researchers in designing questionnaires for other complex and difficult organizational issues.

## Introduction

Psychology has generally ignored the psychometric and theoretical issues in the study of sexual harassment (Faley, 1982). Nieva and Gutek (1981) noted there was no consensus on the set of behaviors that define sexual harassment. The Merit System Protection Board (Burt, 1981; MSPB, 1981) listed seven categories of behavior which might be considered unwanted sexual attention by an individual: rape or sexual assault; pressure for sexual favors; deliberate touching, leaning over, cornering or punching; sexually suggestive looks or gestures; letters, calls of sexual nature; pressure for dates; sexual teasing, jokes, remarks or questions. Feminist theory claims that these behaviors are part of a pattern, rather than independent and unrelated acts. If so, one might expect these behaviors to be psychometrically reliable. The current research tests this claim. Much of the literature on sexual harassment documents the scope and intensity of the problem (Benson & Thomson, 1982; Maihoff & Forrest, 1983; MSPB, 1981). We know that structural factors are related to sexual harassment: sex, age, marital status, and the ratio of males and females in the work unit are all predictors (MSPB, 1981). However, we know less about attitudes and experiences which relate to harassment, once the structural factors are held constant. This research explores both attitudes and structural factors as predictors of sexual harassment, based on our theoretical analysis of the concept of sexual harassment. For a particular behavior to be judged as sexually harassing, it must be sexual in intent (rather than nonsexual) and unwanted or unwelcome by the person who is the target of the behavior (MSPB, 1981). These two independent factors (sexuality and welcomeness) generate four types of variables: (1) sexual harassment - when behaviors are unwelcome and sexual; (2) unwelcome - nonsexual which we call nonsexual aggravation; (3) welcome sexual - which includes both organizationally dysfunctional relations and nondysfunctional ones; and (4) welcome nonsexual - including various forms of social support, and work unit cohesion, which affect organizational climate.

We developed survey measures for each of the four types of variable suggested by our theoretical analysis: measures of the incidence of harassment and consequences of harassment to the individual; a measure of nonsexual aggravation and three brief measures of perceived causes for nonsexual aggravation; measures of attitudes toward sexuality in the work place and behavioral standards for targeting potentially harassing acts to members of the opposite sex within the work unit; and measures of work unit cohesiveness.

Our theoretical analysis suggested that sexual harassment would be most strongly related to the two variables with which it shares a common factor, namely nonsexual aggravation and attitudes toward sexuality. In the real world many behaviors are ambiguous, and individuals differ in whether or not they would classify the behavior as sexual or nonsexual, welcome or unwelcome. Thus, individual differences in judgment on the two factors of sexuality and welcomeness of the same behaviors in an organization would result

in a positive correlation between sexual harassment and nonsexual aggravation, sexual harassment and positive attitudes to sexuality in the work place. The theory also leads to the surprising prediction that measures of organizational climate will not be closely related to sexual harassment, in contrast to the expectations of Nieva and Gutek (1981). This is because welcome nonsexual beliefs do not show a common factor with sexual harassment.

## Method

The organization which sponsored this research (referred to simply as "the organization") is a military installation in the eastern U.S. which employs officers, enlisted soldiers, and civilian workers. The target population in September 1981 consisted of 4822 people. Because the MSPB results showed that sexual harassment of women was likely to be a problem, women were oversampled. Women constituted 6% of the total officer group, 17% of the enlisted group, and 37% of the civilian workforce. Surveys were sent to 482 personnel, (half to women) and the overall response rate was 64%. This figure is clearly lower than the 85% response rate for the MSPB. The response rate for females in this sample (73%) was higher than the response rate for males (55%). We compared the base rates for sexual harassment among civilian females with the base rates reported for each of the 7 items among the federal civilian female workforce. For five of the seven items, there was no significant difference between our sample and the federal population. For two items, the base rate in this sample was significantly below the rate for the federal population (pressure for favors and sexual remarks). The analysis is based on a total of 308 usable returns.

Structural Predictors: Nine background variables were measured reflecting the individual's position in society or in the organization: sex, age, marital status, race, supervisory status, pay grade, percentage of males in the work unit, and two dummy variables representing group membership (officer, enlisted or civilian).

Criteria: Sexual harassment was measured by two scales: a measure of the incidence of harassment on the job in the last 24 months, using the same seven behaviors used by the MSPB (1981) and a seven item measure of adverse consequences to the harassee resulting from harassment. Using the incidence scale (SHI), 39% of the current sample experienced some form of harassment, a figure which is very similar to that reported in the MSPB study (1981). Using the consequence measure (SHC) the figure is 14%.

SHI: The questionnaire items on sexual harassment stated "this section asks about any experience you may have had with uninvited and unwanted sexual attention on the job from persons of either sex." Respondents were asked if they had received uninvited sexual attention during the last 24 months from somewhere where they worked in the organization. ("If you have not been here a full 24 months, report on the time you have been here.") The response codes indicate never, once, once a month or less, 2-4 months, once a week or more. The seven items are: actual or attempted rape or sexual assault; unwanted pressure for sexual favors; unwanted deliberate touching, leaning

over, cornering, or pinching; unwanted sexually suggestive looks or gestures; unwanted letters, phone calls or materials of a sexual nature; unwanted pressure for dates; unwanted sexual teasing, jokes, remarks or questions.

Six questions adopted by the Merit System Protection Board were used to measure the effects of sexual harassment on persons. Only those who were harassed answered these items. These questions asked "how did the unwanted sexual attention affect you?" These items included: my feelings about work; my emotional or physical condition; my ability to work with others on the job; the quality of my work; the quantity of my work; my time and attendance at work. The responses were: became worse; had no effect; became better. An additional question asked all persons if sexual harassment in the organization was enough of a problem to consider leaving the organization.

Each item was coded 1 if the individual reported any worsening on the six MSPB questions or that they were considering leaving the organization because of sexual harassment, or was coded zero if these symptoms were absent. These two criterion variables (SHI and SHC) intercorrelated .416. Cross-tabulation shows that of those who reported any sexual harassment on anyone of the 7 items on SHI, 34% reported experiencing one or more of the ill-effects of sexual harassment.

Perceptual Predictors. Our theoretical model specified three categories of perceptual variable for which predictions were made: there were four measures of nonsexual aggravation (NSA, FIXIN, FIXEX, and SELF); three variables relating to welcome sexualty - a measure of fraternization (FRAT) and two measures of attitudes toward sexuality (ASW, HBS); one measure of welcome nonsexual experiences - work unit climate (CLIM).

NSA is a five item scale of nonsexual aggravation. Aggravation was defined as "unfair or unwarranted personal criticism not related to your work performance, or any unpleasant nonsexual teasing, jokes or petty annoyance not related to your duty performance." People were asked how often they had experienced such aggravation from anyone of five categories of personnel: the immediate supervisor, other higher ranking personnel, co-workers, subordinates, others outside the work unit. Higher scores indicate aggravation by more categories of personnel in the last 24 months. A second block of questions required respondents to make causal attributes for the one experience that had the greatest impact on them. Each potential cause was rated on a four point scale as not a cause, possibly a cause, definitely a cause, or the most important cause.

FIXIN is a three item scale reflecting the tendency to attribute experienced nonsexual aggravation to fixed internal attributes, such as one's own age, sex, or race (alpha =.63).

FIXEX is a two item scale reflecting the tendency to attribute causality to fixed attributes of the situation such as job stress or the "personality" of the aggravator (alpha =.74).

SELF is a single item reflecting the tendency to attribute the nonsexual aggravation, at least in part, to the target's own behavior in the situation. About 20% of the respondents blamed themselves, in part, for the nonsexual aggravation.

FRAT is a single item measure of improper senior-subordinate relationships between the sexes in the organization, which has a written policy condemning such relationships. This policy was quoted verbatim and respondents were asked if "there is fraternization, as defined above, between males and females in my unit or office." Responses were made on a five point Likert scale of agree-disagree.

ASW is a six item Likert measure of general attitudes opposed to the expression of sexuality in the work place, adopted from the Merit System Protection Board survey (alpha =.64). High scorers tend to disagree with statements like "I think its all right for people to have sexual affairs with people they work with;" "There's nothing wrong when people use their sexuality to get ahead on the job;" "People who receive annoying sexual attention have usually asked for it;" "People should not be so quick to take offense when someone expresses a sexual interest in them;" "When people say they have been sexually harassed, they are usually just trying to get the person they accused in trouble;" "The issues of sexual harassment has been exaggerated--most incidents are simply normal attraction between people."

HBS is a ten item scale, more behaviorally specific than ASW. Organizational units may vary in the extent to which a majority of workers adopt standards of courtesy and ethics which forbid specific behaviors wich could be sexually harassing. This section asked respondents to "Consider each of the following acts you might perform toward a person of the opposite sex who works in your unit or office: which do you consider all right for you to do toward the other person." The response codes included: A. I would never do this to anyone in my unit; B. I think this would be ok for me to do to certain people of the opposite sex; C. I think this is ok for me to do to almost anyone of the opposite sex (if they are single); D. I think this is ok for me to do to anyone of the opposite sex. There were eleven specific behaviors listed including: "Looking at the person in a sexually suggestive manner;" "Showing a pornographic magazine or picture;" "Asking the person about his or her sex life;" "Telling a sexual joke to the person;" "Putting my arm around the person at the workplace;" "Kissing or hugging the person at the workplace;" "Asking the person for a date;" "Pinching or patting the other person on the buttocks;" "Complimenting the person on his or her physical attractiveness;" "Promising extra help and support at work in exchange for sexual favors;" "Calling the individual an affectionate nickname (such as 'honey' or 'sweetheart'), rather than using title or rank with their name." A composite score was used: HBS--consisting of the number of items (excluding joking) which the individual responded A. "I would never do this." Thus, it is a measure of strictness of standards forbidding act is which could lead to allegations of sexual harassment. The higher the score, the more the individual would totally avoid all such behaviors (alpha =.70). These two measures of attitudes to sexuality in the workplace are positively intercorrelated as one would expect (r=.436). The correlation is lower than one

would expect, given the reliabilities of ASW and HBS. Thus, it is concluded that they measure different aspects of attitudes to sexuality in the workplace.

CLIM is a composite of four items measuring work unit climate, two from the Merit System Protection Board survey dealing with perceptions of supervisor's willingness to handle complaints, ("I feel free to bring up work related concerns or suggestions to my immediate supervisor" and "I feel my supervisor would correct general work related concerns or suggestions, if possible.") Two dealing with peer friendliness and getting along well, ("People in my work unit at [name of organization] get along well," and "People in my work unit are friendly to me.") Responses were made on a five point Likert scale (alpha =.79).

## Results

Table 1 shows the reliability of the two sexual harassment scales and the nonsexual aggravation scale. The results demonstrate that different behaviors which are classified as sexually harassing are perceived to be generalizable for each gender. In subsequent analysis, the scales were dichotomized for ease of interpretation: 1 for any experience of harassment or aggravation, 0 otherwise.

TABLE 1 HERE

Table 2 shows the beta weights for each of the nine structural predictors on each of the two criteria of sexual harassment. Incidence of harassment (SHI) is more predictable than adverse consequences (SHC). The beta weights for SHI show that when other variables are held constant the rate of sexual harassment is higher for females, younger persons, single persons, and enlisted personnel. The beta weights for predicting SHC tell a similar story, but only sex and enlisted status are significant.

TABLE 2 HERE

Table 3 shows partial correlations between attitudinal variables and sexual harassment, holding constant the nine structural variables. The results for SHI are supportive of our theoretical model of the perceptual factors related to harassment: four variables reflecting nonsexual aggravation (NSA, FIXIN, FIXEX, SELF) were related significantly to SHI as expected. The measures of attitudes toward sexuality in the workplace gave mixed results. For HBS, the correlation was significant: those who had standards forbidding them to initiate behavior that might be considered sexually harassing to others, tended not to be sexually harassed themselves. For ASW, the correlation was not significant: those who disapproved of sexuality at work (in general terms) were no less likely to experience sexual harassment.

FRAT was significantly related: that is, those who agree that "There is fraternization in my unit" tend to have experienced some sexual harassment. As our theory also predicted, climate (CLIM) was not related: those who reported a generally good organizational climate were not necessarily any less likely to experience sexual harassment.

TABLE 3 HERE

The results for SHC give partial support to our theoretical model. That is, persons who experience nonsexual aggravation (NSA) also tend to experience adverse consequences from sexual harassment (SHC) holding constant structural factors. Persons who experienced nonsexual aggravation and attribute it to age, sex, or race (FIXIN) also tend to experience higher rates of adverse consequences from sexual harassment (SHC), holding constant other factors. However, neither measure of attitude toward sexuality in the workplace correlates significantly with adverse consequences, as expected by our model. Work unit climate was not significantly related to adverse consequences, as expected from our model.

Table 3 also shows that the nine background variables correlate significantly with each of the attitudinal variables related to sexual harassment, except for SELF. That is, the same structural variables which affect sexual harassment, also affect perceptual variables.

## Discussion

Causal relationships cannot be inferred from these data. That is, we do not know if the experience of nonsexual aggravation preceeds the experience of harassment or vice-versa, or if one begins to perceive fraternization before experiencing sexual harassment or after. It seems clear that future research might well examine the timing of events more closely.

Consistent with other studies, this research found that the incidence of sexual harassment is associated with structural factors of age, marital status and sex (Merit System Protection Board, 1981). This study showed also that at the time of the survey (1981) enlisted personnel were more likely to be harassed than civilians or officers, even after holding constant sex, marital status, age and other factors. Anecdotal reports of incidents of sexual harassment in military settings were published in 1980 (Adams, 1980), but did not allow us to estimate the rate of such incidents. More recent reports based on interviews with women soldiers in the field suggest that they do not see sexual harassment as a major problem, in comparison to other problems such as fraternization (Mazer, 1984).

Our theoretical model of the perceptual factors related to sexual harassment received modest support. Nonsexual aggravation is clearly and strongly related to both the incidence and the severity of sexual harassment. The model does not work quite as well for attitudes toward sexuality. In retrospect, the two measures of attitudes toward sexuality in the workplace

seem more specific than the theory requires: one measure (ASW) reflects refusal to endorse sexual affairs in the workplace, the other (HBS) reflects avoidance of behaviors which could be misconstrued or sexually harassing by potential victims. A more direct test of our model would involve asking about the incidence of sexual behavior regardless of whether or not it was welcome or unwelcome by potential target persons.

The topic of sexuality is still an extremely sensitive one in surveys. Researchers in nonacademic settings may understandably be reluctant to ask more questions on sexuality than are strictly necessary to the research problem. Unfortunately, the result of this reluctance is a lack of knowledge of sexual behavior in the workplace. Attitudes to sexuality, as apposed to behavior, have been studied. In the federal study, attitudes toward sexuality in the workplace tended to be negative (Merit System Protection Board, 1981). Gutek (1981) and others (Iowa State University, 1982) reported that some women feel flattered by sexual attention or consider it a compliment. Nieva and Gutek (1981) note that many women and men view the workplace as a setting for meeting potential sexual partners (p64). Quinn and Lees (1984) argue that because of this embarassment, sexual issues in the workplace will be generally ignored, except for the issue of sexual harassment.

Even though sexual harassment is an established topic in the literature of personnel management, there is no mention of it in the APA thesaurus of psychological terms. Perhaps it is because there are no connecting links from social or personality theory to the very specific phenomenon of "sexual harassment" defined by the legal and administrative system. Research on organizational stress, or organizational ethics may be important. Kahn and his co-workers (1964) gave an example of what we would now refer to as sexual harassment: a waitress was expected to put up with sexual remarks as a condition of her job. They labeled this behavior as an example of person - role conflict, conflict between a person's own personal standards and the requirements of the job. Kahn and his colleagues clearly disapproved of the conflict, and recognized it as a source of cost to the organization. Their strategy for dealing with sexual harassment and other person - role conflicts was to teach people to cope more effectively with the stress. Unfortunately, as our research shows, a good organizational climate is not sufficient to stop sexual harassment. Sexual harassment occurs often in spite of good organizational climate.

This research has focused on perceptual variables which are associated with sexual harassment in general. The one aspect of sexual harassment which appears to be most troublesome and most frequent is sexist humor. Although our data shows that sexually harassing humor can be reliably included in a general measure of the incidence of sexual harassment, the topic is important enough to merit a separate discussion. Such a discussion, based in part on results from the present survey, has been presented elsewhere (Priest, 1984). Two points from the latter study reinforce the more general point made here. First, there is no relationship between perceiving good natured joking in the workplace and being the victim of unwanted sexual teasing: management cannot suppress sexually harassing joking by suppressing good natured joking.

Second, among women who do not tell sexual jokes, 38% are still subject to unwanted sexual teasing. Controlling sexual harassment is not as simple as advising females not to act provocatively, as traditional sex role concepts suggest (Priest, 1984, p11).

Organizations will continue to establish policies against sexual harassment, to publicize grievance procedures, and to establish training programs (Driscoll, 1981; Kronenberger & Bourke, 1981). This is especially true because the cost of sexual harassment to organizations keeps increasing (Wymer, 1983). Women who press their complaints through formal grievance procedures are more likely to win their appeals than men (Dalton & Todor, 1985). Researchers should continue to explore the perceptual as well as the structural predictors. Our research has established that the experience of nonsexual aggravation can, in one organization at least, be associated with sexual harassment. Managers may wish to monitor the level of sexual harassment in their organizations. If they do so repeatedly, our measure of nonsexual aggravation has something to recommend it: it relates to sexual harassment, but may be less obtrusive, controversial and subject to the kind of misunderstanding that survey measures of sexual harassment sometimes occasion.

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Table 1

Cronbach's Alpha for Selected Scales

| Scale | Male Sample | Female Sample | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| Incidence: Number of different sexually harassing behaviors. (7 items) | .78 | .81 | .82 |
| Consequence: Number of ill-effects due to sexual harassment. (6 items) | .49[a] | .79 | .77 |
| Number of sources of nonsexual aggravation. (5 items) | .83 | .79 | .80 |

[a]This figure is based on three items with nonzero variance.

Table 2

Structural Predictors of Sexual Harassment

| Structural Predictors | Betas SHI | SHC |
|---|---|---|
| Sex (Female=2, Male=1) | .42* | .21* |
| Age | -.14* | -.06 |
| Marital Status (2=not single, 1-single) | -.12* | -.08 |
| Race (1=minority, 2=white) | .00 | .01 |
| Supervisory Status | -.03 | -.02 |
| Pay Grade | .10 | -.04 |
| Sex Ratio | -.04 | -.04 |
| Dummy Variable 1=Officer | .08 | -.03 |
| Dummy Variable 2=Enlisted | .16* | .16* |
| Multiple Correlation | .52* | .33* |

* $p<.05$

Table 3

Validities of Perceptual Predictors of Sexual Harassment

| Perceptual And Attitudinal Predictors | Multiple R With Nine Variables | Partial Correlations With SHC | |
|---|---|---|---|
| NSA, Nonsexual aggravation. | .42* | .33* | .14* |
| FIXIN, Attributes NSE to age, race or sex. | .44* | .21* | .14* |
| FIXEX, Attributes NSA to external causes. | .27* | .24* | .10 |
| SELF, Attributes NSA to own action. | .19 | .14* | .06 |
| FRAT, Fraternization. | .31* | .15* | -.01 |
| CLIM, Work unit climate. | .29* | -.07 | -.01 |
| ASW, Attitudes to sexuality at work. | .41* | -.02 | .08 |
| HBS, Specific behavior standards for work unit. | .30* | -.14* | -.05 |

[a] holding constant the nine variables in Table 2.

* $p < .05$